

Stumble Softly Towards Me by Luddleston

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Summary:

Bull's pretty certain flirting with the commander is going to get him nowhere.

Cullen doesn't understand what exactly Bull is trying to do.

Somehow, things work out.

Stumble Softly Towards Me

Author's Note:

- For [Dragonflies and Katydid](#)s.

The lingering headache that had been his constant companion since Cassandra had recruited him for her damned Inquisition was becoming nigh-unbearable now that the Herald of Andraste had acquired a band of mercenaries who had set up their tents close enough to dazzle all the young recruits who'd never seen the kind of dirty moves and non-formation fighting the Chargers utilized in the field.

And if Cullen saw one more green recruit try to pull off one of Cremisius's battering-ram style attacks and fall flat on his ass, he was going straight to the Iron Bull himself and telling him to camp somewhere far away from Cullen's young, easily influenced soldiers.

He tried, once, to ask Bull to tone the whole thing down, but he ended up having a glass of questionable alcohol in a tent with a bunch of soldiers crowded around, the Bull complimenting him on his swordplay all the while. The more Cullen drank, the more he thought Bull was talking about a very different kind of swordplay.

But Bull flirted with everyone, and Cullen woke up hungover in his quarters in Haven's chantry, his migraine worse than ever, having moved beyond the stage of pinching his temples and taking his pain out on some hapless recruit and into the "ask Cassandra if she has any elfroot" one.

"Morning, Captain," Bull said at breakfast, looking awake and not the least bit hungover. Cullen nearly jumped straight out of his skin when Bull clapped him on the shoulder. He was still unused to seeing Bull's silhouette over his shoulder, the outline of horns cast on the wall always set his teeth on edge.

"It's 'Commander,'" Cullen corrected, adding a quick, "good morning," on the tail end so he didn't seem quite so rude. Being rude to a Ben-Hassrath

spy or a close friend of Andraste's chosen both seemed ill-advised, so offending a man who was both was... well, Cullen was not going to attempt it. After all, Josephine would be pleased to find her efforts in teaching him cordiality were rubbing off, despite the fact that there were much better places to practice the art than a dining room with the Iron Bull.

"Last night still wearing off?" Bull asked, "You really shouldn't've let Rocky give you that homemade punch in the liver."

"It's taking remarkably long to do so," Cullen said, before catching himself—of course it was taking longer than usual, now that he was no longer relying on lyrium to function.

"Yeah, that's how it works," Bull said, a hint of amusement in the fold of his dimples. "Guess you don't go drinking a lot, huh, Commander?"

"Not on the regular," Cullen admitted, taking a small bite of his toast in hopes that it wouldn't induce any kind of lingering nausea. "Cassandra, hm, *encourages* me to relax more often, but despite it all..." he sighed. "I do it infrequently."

"She's right," Bull said, his huge horns nearly catching on a swinging light when he nodded his agreement to Cassandra's sentiments. "She damn near caught herself agreeing when Sera said you've got a stick up your arse." He pitched his voice up to quote Sera on the end of that one.

Cullen frowned at his breakfast. "I do not."

"Don't gotta defend yourself to me." Bull leaned back in his chair, his legs kicked out right where someone could trip over them. His huge boots would be difficult to miss, though. "You're an organized kinda guy. Like Krem, he's always keeping my ass in line."

Cullen thought perhaps Bull was more organized than he seemed, anyway. "Well, it's a lot to handle."

"My ass? Yeah it is," Bull said, a smile spreading from one corner of his jaw to the other while Cullen spluttered.

"I—you—Maker's breath. That isn't what I *meant*."

"Sure it's not." Bull was grinning like he was flirting with a girl in a bar, not having a civil conversation with the hung-over commander of the Inquisition. Cullen might have been aggravated had he not been too tired to feel anything other than a pressing need to return to his quarters and his bed.

"Excuse me," Cullen said, standing abruptly, leaving his breakfast unfinished on the table. "I must be going. There's... well, there has to be *something* I'm needed for."

He found that being badgered by Roderick in front of the Chantry was perhaps even more annoying than uncomfortable conversations with the Bull.

"Is something wrong with my other eye, or am I actually seeing this?" Bull stared exaggeratedly at the Commander as he wandered into the bar, his ears pink from the cold outside, shaking snow out of his mantle.

"He get the stick out?" Sera asked. She was laying on a bench to Bull's side, one knee propped up, the other leg swinging back and forth underneath her. "Or's he just trying to do something to make himself not make that face."

"Face?"

"Yeah, that one where he looks like he just shat himself."

"Aww, don't be mean about his face," Bull said, "it's perfectly nice."

"Eugh."

"I'm buying him a drink," Bull determined, and Sera nearly rolled off the bench.

"Think he'll go for it?"

"Who knows," Bull said, "might as well try."

Bull waved pleasantly at Flissa when he passed the bar, and he clapped Cullen on the shoulder almost hard enough to send him flying. The Commander was a surprisingly little guy under all the armor. "Cullen! How's it going?" Bull asked, his voice filling the tavern all the way to the ceiling.

"It's, well. Could be better, I suppose, but the troops are shaping up decently and the Herald is back in the area, I believe?"

"Saw her in here earlier," Bull confirmed. His palm was still on Cullen's back, steering him toward the corner where Sera was still sprawled over the furniture and a few of the Chargers were gathered around a small table, playing a game of wicked grace that Krem was currently winning, but Skinner would eventually conquer. "Sit down, lemme buy you a round."

"It's really not necessary," Cullen said, "I was only here for the Herald." He glanced around the crowded tavern. "And it seems she's not here."

"Give the boss a break, yeah? She just got back, Cass's probably already hounding her." Bull knew that one for a fact, he'd seen her leave with Cassandra a few minutes ago, the two of them talking in a manner that seemed far too serious for a bar. He got the feeling he'd freak Cullen out if he told the guy exactly how much he noticed, though.

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck—that seemed to be some kind of tic for him, like how he pinched the bridge of his nose or massaged his temples whenever he was stressed. "You're right," he admitted, "Cassandra did tell me she was looking for her as well." He sighed, like it was effortful for him to say, "I suppose I'll stay for a drink."

He stayed for three, because Cullen was incapable of telling Flissa's sweet little serving girl no, and by the third, Bull was stealing sips of his drink and Cullen was leaned against his side, flushed pink from the bridge of his nose to the tips of his ears, chuckling softly at Skinner's latest joke, which only made her start in on another one, her thickly accented voice filling the space between them. Dalish was cackling at him, not at the jokes, because she'd

heard them all, and she was simply amused that someone else actually thought Skinner was funny. Eh, Bull had always pegged Cullen for a dry-humored kind of guy.

Cullen was warm against Bull's side, and Bull was starting to think he just might fall asleep, but after a momentary doze, Cullen startled into wakefulness beside him and shook his head. "I should go," he said, and standing, he was only just taller than Bull.

"I mean, I'd be fine if I had to haul your ass back to your room," Bull said, "wouldn't be the first time I've done that for somebody."

"I trust I can make my own way back," Cullen said, and he pulled his cloak more tightly around himself as he steeled against the frigid air that they both knew was beyond the tavern door.

"Alright," Bull said, "but don't end up passed out in a snowdrift."

Cullen's face twisted like he couldn't tell whether to be amused or disgusted. "I'll try not to."

"Yeah. Have a good one, Commander."

Bull watched him leave, his steps swaying a little, but not enough to be truly drunk. He supposed he was only used to seeing Cullen walk so stiffly, like he was holding himself in line with a battalion of marching soldiers. He looked easier now, more relaxed, and Bull was pleased with his efforts.

Haven burned, and Cullen imagined even now, miles away, that he could see the smoke on the horizon. It was no use looking for the ruins of the Inquisition's home, not now that they were moving ever forward, directed by whatever knowledge Solas had of the area, not now that they'd found the Herald again and she was *alive* and what had been able to be saved was piled in their small camp. They were sheltered against the wall of a cliff, except that Cullen had wandered too far from camp to be protected from the fierce winds.

"Cullen, hey," Bull called, louder than the wind, but not by much. Cullen didn't respond, but tilted his head toward Bull enough that Bull would know he'd been acknowledged. "Come on, let's get you out of the cold."

"I'm fine," Cullen said, waving him off. He was beyond the point of the cold hurting, though. Now, he was just numb.

"Nah, c'mon. You humans aren't meant for this kind of weather."

"Says the man who's not wearing a shirt."

Bull shrugged. "Nobody in camp had one that would fit me. Plus, I'm not about to freeze my face off. C'mon, Cullen. You're not gonna look as pretty without a nose."

Cullen sighed and took a half-step toward Bull. "A moment longer, if you please. I need to think," he said, waving Bull off with one gloved hand.

Bull crossed his arms over his chest, standing there solidly despite all the snow. "Yeah, I'm not going," he said. "You need to get back, I mean. I know you're sick, or whatever."

Cullen frowned. "What." His mind was racing, who had told Bull about the lyrium withdrawal? He knew Cassandra was close with him, but she wouldn't—*he had told her to keep this quiet*, Andraste's mercy.

"I dunno what it is, if you're wondering," Bull said. He spoke like he was still talking about the weather, not like he'd somehow learned of Cullen's illness with the help of nothing other than his own observation. Cullen was mentally kicking himself. He should have known this would happen—the man was a *spy*. It was too much to think about; his head was spinning. Bull was offering his arm to Cullen. Ridiculous.

Cullen took his arm anyway, wrapping his gloved hand around Bull's thick, scarred forearm. "Please, tell me you haven't spoken to anyone about this.

"Course not."

“Good.” Cullen clung to Bull a little tighter, wondering if he could trust him to continue to keep the information a secret. He wouldn’t trust Bull with anything more than what he had self-divined, though.

“You gonna be alright? You were pacing a track through the snow and whatever’s below it, too.”

“I will be fine,” he said, but the words didn’t sound true. “I just... I wonder if we’ll make it out of this alive.”

“We will,” Bull said, “the boss’s got a good head on her shoulders, and she’s got you, and Cassandra, and Leliana, and Josie.”

“Well. Thank goodness for the three of them,” Cullen said, as they started back for the camp.

“And for you.”

“If you must say so.”

They didn’t speak much for the rest of the way, because the wind was likely to steal the words out of their mouths before they made it past their lips. Cullen did not let go of Bull’s arm until the fires of the camp burned bright enough that he could practically feel the warmth returning to him.

“Are you—?” Bull began, as Cullen started to move away from him, and Cullen thought of how very unlikely it was for Bull to truncate his sentences like that.

“Am I?”

“You going back to your tent?”

“Yes,” Cullen said, “although I wouldn’t mind if I caught Cassandra on the way.”

“Alright,” Bull said, like something in him was soothed at the idea that Cullen would be safely asleep in his tent, where he wouldn’t freeze to death. “Take care, Commander.”

Skyhold was incredible in just about every way, particularly the way of “how the hell did everyone just forget about this place for so long?”, and even though Bull spent most of his time ducking through doorways, trying to fit his massive-even-for-a-Qunari shoulders through doorways designed by elves, he enjoyed the place. The members of the Inquisition were starting to fall into their own routines, like they had back in Haven, and by now, Bull could nearly predict where everyone would be at any given time.

Which made today weird, because Cullen had missed his and Dorian’s weekly chess match in the gardens. Bull knew, because he’d seen Dorian huffing around the corridor that was the fastest way between the gardens and his corner of the library, and it was too early in the day for him to be annoyed because he lost again.

Bull started for Cullen’s office, the stairs to the battlements making his knee ache a little. The bubble of warmth Skyhold was situated in, which Bull liked to believe was a convenience of placement rather than magic, had been helping the old wound some, but it still acted up from time to time.

He paused outside the door, because, well. He didn’t know why, but that second of pause was enough for him to hear shuddering, unsteady breathing from inside. Something was off.

Bull knocked, throwing in a decently loud, “hey, Commander?” for good measure.

The door swung open and Cullen was standing there, looking like absolute shit. His face was drawn and so pale, the circles under his eyes looked black as bruises in contrast. His hair flopped onto a tacky forehead, the neckline of his shirt stank with sweat, and Bull knew something was definitely wrong.

“The fuck happened to you?”

“I’m unwell at the moment,” Cullen said, which, yeah, any idiot could’ve seen that.

Bull stepped in the door and Cullen sat back against his desk, crossing his arms over his chest and hunching over a little. “You don’t have to,” Bull said, “but. If you let me know what was happening, maybe Stitches could —“

“It’s not likely he’s seen anything like this before,” Cullen said.

Bull raised an eyebrow and cocked his horns at an angle. “Try me.”

“I... well, when I was a Templar, I took lyrium regularly, and I’ve stopped,” he said. “Lyrium is addictive for non-mages, and withdrawal from it presents one with certain...symptoms.”

“You’d be surprised what we’ve seen, the Chargers,” Bull said. “Gray, one of our guys, he used to be a Templar. Never got this bad, though, but I can try what worked for him, if you’ve got some elfroot and some time.”

“It’s unlikely that it would get this bad for a soldier with regular, low doses of the stuff, but I drank more of the stuff than was strictly advisable, even by the rules of Templars.” Cullen walked around his desk to take a seat in the chair behind it, and Bull noticed the unsteadiness of his steps, the shakiness of his knees. “Elfroot’s in there,” he said, waving Bull toward a box that was full of basic medical supplies.

Bull laid everything out on Cullen’s desk, pulled up a chair to sit across him as he worked, measuring out the right amount of dried leaves to mix with enough water to form a smooth paste. Cullen frowned at his progress. “You can’t make a potion,” he said, “it’ll just... I can’t keep anything down,” he said.

“Thought you looked a little green,” Bull replied, “and I’m not gonna make something you have to drink.” The room filled with the medicinal smell, covering over the scent of stale sweat. “Mind if I touch you? This just... if you put it over the thinnest parts of your skin, it absorbs into your bloodstream.”

Cullen nodded, gave Bull permission to drag his chair around to the other side of the desk. Bull dipped his fingers into the poultice and felt for

Cullen's temples first, knowing that the soothing buzz of the herb against the place where Cullen held the most tension would hopefully help. Cullen relaxed under his touch, just the slightest bit, and Bull massaged his temples for a second longer than was strictly necessary, just because it made Cullen loosen that much more tension.

Bull painted faint lines of green down Cullen's throat, and Cullen swallowed, pushing Bull's thumb up with the motion. "How's that?" Bull asked, and Cullen swallowed again.

"It's... it helps, a little," he said.

"Give me your hands?"

Cullen placed them delicately in Bull's lap, and Bull took each of his scarred hands in turn, running his thumb over Cullen's knuckles and then his palms, turning his hands up so that he could rub the poultice into the thin skin on the inside of Cullen's wrists, where Bull could feel his pulse steadily slowing to a relaxed rate. When Bull moved to the opposite hand, Cullen laid his left on Bull's shoulder, his skin still slightly-feverish in its warmth.

"Thank you," Cullen said, once Bull had finished and wiped his hands clean.

"Anytime," Bull said, and he watched Cullen's face for a moment, because there were a lot of conflicting emotions flickering across it, and because Cullen was damn fine to look at.

Cullen wavered for another moment, then came stuttering back with, "Can I—ah—maybe—may I kiss you?"

Bull was stuck on a laugh that caught in his throat, because of *course* Cullen would start things this way, like he somehow hadn't noticed Bull flirting the whole damn time. "Course you can," he said, pushing Cullen's hair out of his face so he could bend down and press his lips to Cullen's. Trembling hands reached up to hold onto Bull's, and Cullen let a happy sigh slip out between their lips.

It didn't last long, but it was enough that when Bull leaned back, Cullen was smiling at him, despite the pain and tension he still held in the creases of his forehead.

"Thank you," he said again, and let himself fall forward into Bull's arms, his entire body relaxed at last.

Bull kissed the top of Cullen's head.

Finally.